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ABSTRACT

Information on child sexual abuse is most meaningful and effective when given to the child from a parent. To investigate the kinds of prevention information that is exchanged in households and the obstacles to effective exchange, 521 Boston parents (187 male, 334 female), with children aged 6 to 14, were interviewed. The interview focused on knowledge of sexual abuse, instruction given to children, incidence and how it was handled, and a self-administered section on respondents' childhood sexual abuse experiences. An analysis of the results show that in spite of a surprising amount of knowledge about the problem of sexual abuse, only 29 percent of the parents had talked with their children about it. Mothers tended to discuss the subject with their children more than fathers, with the majority of parents feeling that age 9 was an appropriate age for talking about sexual abuse. Overall, parents tended to be vague in their discussions and relatively complacent, doubting that abuse would occur to their child in their neighborhood. Further reasons for avoiding talking with their children were age of child, fear of frightening the child, and overall reticence in discussing sex. The two biggest motivators for parents communicating with children about sexual abuse were hearing about abuse that happened to someone else in the neighborhood or social network, and having been victimized themselves. (BL)

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WHAT PARENTS TELL THEIR CHILDREN ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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Writers and professionals have begun to turn their attention in recent years to the problem of preventing child sexual abuse. Books, curricula for school children, and even traveling drama groups have all appeared with a common goal of trying to alert children, parents and professionals to the problem before it occurs.

Several features of the problem of sexual abuse make it particularly important to approach through a strategy of primary prevention.

1) Child sexual abuse appears to be a problem of widespread scope. Several studies of adults reporting on their own childhood now suggest that a large fraction of all children -- estimates range from 15 to 34% of all girls and 3 to 9% of all boys -- will suffer victimization (Finkelhor, 1979, 1982a, 1983b; Russell, 1982). These numbers make it clear that sexual abuse is a major public mental health problem that needs to be combatted through an approach that will reach a wide segment of the population.

2) Evidence suggests that most incidents of child sexual abuse are not reported to any adult when they occur (Finkelhor, 1979; 1982a), so most victimized children are unlikely to be helped after their victimization. This underlines the importance of reaching children before victimization occurs.

3) Even when they are identified, there is no assurance that most victims are helped in the aftermath. Not many child care or mental health workers have the training and expertise to treat child sexual abuse. Treatment programs do not exist in many communities.

4) Work with children who have been abused suggests that abuse could be prevented in many instances if children had had prior instruction. Lack of knowledge or uncertainty about norms of behavior often plays a role in a child's victimization. For example:

-- children often say they were confused and misled by the offender's insistence that the sexual activity was proper, and normal.

-- children often say they did not know they had a right to refuse.

-- children often say they did not believe they would be defended by other adults (including parents) if they refused or complained.

-- children often say they were thrown off their guard when the adult behaved in a way that they had never been led to expect.

Accounts of these scrts suggests that children properly educated about the problem of sexual abuse might be substantially less vulnerable tc victimizaticn.

But are children beinq properly educated? Thcse ccncerned with prevention cf child sexual abuse have been worried about the kind of education that most children receive (Sanford, 1980). They have pointed out that children rarely qet sufficient information to arm them to resist sexual victimizatior, and that what information they receive is tsually misleading and poorly timed.

RCIE CF PARENTS

The concern atout the educatior of children has focussed particularly cn tte role that parents play. Professionals sense the enormous opportunity and advantage that parents have to affect the prcblen, ccmpared to the limited opportunitites enjoyed by the prcfessionals themselves. Parents are clearly in a pivotal positicr to make a large contribution to efforts at prevention for a number of reasons.

For one thing, sexual abuse can occur to a child very early in life. Parents may be the only adults who are ir a pcsitior to help a child of such a ycurg age tc avcid abuse.

Secondly, there is an ideology that has a strcng hold cn American families that irfcrmation cn sexual subjects should only be imparted to children by their parents. Professicnals, cowed by earlier enccurter with this idecloqy, often feel a qreat deal of reticence about discussinq such subjects with children. Thus if parents dc rct nentior certain matters to children, there is no assurance that other adults will.

Thirdly, much abuse is ccmmitted by family members, and parents may be the only authcrities who can engage in prevention activities that are effective against this kind cf family abuse. How credible, fcr example, is a teacher who warns a child about the behavior of certain close relatives? A child is much mcre apt to believe such cauticns when imparted by a parent.

Fourth, parents have a qreat advantaqe in beinq able to integrate discussicrs of sexual abuse with what the child already knows. Parents are aware of children's level cf knowledqe with regard to sex ard adults. Children will be better able to understand information that is presented in the ccntext of knowledqe they already have.

Finally, part of any prevention of child sexual abtse is to enable a child tc feel that he or she can appeal for help from a parent. When parents tell children about child sexual abuse, it opens this lire cf communication. The mere fact that children feel confident that they can go to their tarent for help cr informatien abcut the prcblem may make them less vulnerable to abuse.

All the above are important reasons why information about child sexual abuse is more meaningful and effective when it comes from a parent. Yet the assumption is widespread that parents neglect this responsibility and opportunity. The present study was an attempt to assess what kinds of prevention information that gets exchanged in most households, and what seem to be the obstacles to a more effective exchange.

STUDY DESIGN

The study consisted of a survey of adults in the Boston metropolitan area who had children age 6 to 14, living with them at the time. The Survey Research Center of the University of Massachusetts, which conducted the survey, drew an area probability sample of 4,344 households, all of which were screened for the presence of a child between the ages of 6 and 14. Of the 700 households that fit the study requirements, interviewers were able to conduct interviews with 521 parents: a response rate of 74%.

Trained interviewers conducted the interviews, which lasted approximately an hour. The interview included questions about what respondents knew about the problem of sexual abuse, whether and how they had instructed their children on the problem, whether their child had ever to their knowledge been the victim of sexual abuse and, if so, how they had dealt with it. A final self-administered section of the interview asked about respondents' own childhood sexual abuse experiences.

The survey was designed to include both fathers and mothers. However, because 20% of the families were single parent households headed by women, the sex ratio of the study was somewhat skewed and included just 187 men compared to 334 women.

On other characteristics, the sample was quite typical of the Boston population as a whole. Eighty-nine percent of the parents were white, 6% black and 3% hispanic. (Boston has a small minority population for a large city.) The majority (56%) of the respondents were Catholic, 26% were Protestant, 9% were Jewish, and 7% were other or no religion. In terms of total family income, 16% of the sample fell below $10,000, while 25% made $35,000 or more.

Because of the requirement that the adult be a parent and have a child at least 6 years old, the sample was somewhat older than the adult population of Boston in general. The median age was 38, with only 8 percent of the sample under the age 30. At the same time, since a parent still had to be living with his or her child to be included in the study, not many older adults were included. Only 7% of the sample was 50 or over.

Seventy-two percent of the respondents were employed, only three percent considered themselves unemployed and the rest were primarily homemakers. In terms of education, only 12% of the respondents had not completed high school, 33% had a high school

diploma but no more, 33% had some college or a college degree and 15% had been to graduate school.

TALKING ABOUT SEX ABUSE

Our most important objective was to find out whether parents had ever talked with their children about child sexual abuse. We approached the subject by first asking parents about whether they had talked with their children about a whole range of emotionally laden subjects, ranging from suicide to abortion. The question read, "Can you remember a situation where you talked to your child about ____?" The list of topics, accompanied by the per cent of parents who had discussed them is shown in Table 1.

Some emotional topics -- death, kidnapping, pregnancy and birth and even drugs -- seemed to be relatively easy to discuss and had been brought up by the vast majority of parents. Sexual abuse, however, was not one of the easy topics. It was the next to least often discussed subject on the list, being a little easier to talk about than birth control, and a little more difficult than abortion. Only 29% of the parents said they had talked with their children about sexual abuse.

Although few parents had talked to their children explicitly about sexual abuse, this was not the full story. We had found in our pretesting that many parents insisted on qualifying their answer to our question. "No," they would say, "I haven't talked about sexual abuse, at least not <u>in so many words</u>." Or they might say, "Well, I sort of talked about it."

Besides the 29% who had discussed sexual abuse directly, an additional 31% of the parents we interviewed said they had had some conversation with their child where they believed they were talking about sexual abuse, but perhaps not in a direct way (see Table 2).

We asked people for more specifics about these conversations, and they gave us examples of what they meant. "I told him not to get into stranger's cars", said one parent. "I cautioned him about talking to strange people and getting into cars or taking candy." "Some people are mentally ill and do bad things to children," said another.

A very common pattern was for parents to talk about kidnapping and think they were warning a child about sexual abuse at the same time. They would caution children about getting into cars or going with strangers into the woods. The image of sexual abuse would be part of what was on their mind, but they would not mention it specifically. The emphasis they gave the child was not to accept favors or rides from strangers.

A number of other parents hastened to tell us that although they themselves had not talked with the children about sexual abuse, some other person had. In most cases this other person was the respondent's spouse.

It is hard to know exactly how accurate that figure (11%) is. Some spouses may not have really known whether their partner had really talked about it. Other spouses may have assumed that the partner had, when in fact the partner's discussion was very vague or indirect.

Our impression was that it was socially desirable for a parent to say that they or someone else had indeed told the child. Our figures suggest that only a minority of children got told and that even these estimates were inflated by people's good intentions.

MOTHERS VS. FATHERS

As might be expected, mothers did a much better job of talking with their children about sexual abuse than did fathers. Thirty-six per cent of the mothers said they had discussed the subject compared to only 15% of the fathers ($F=26.44$, $p<.001$). This is very consistent with everything we know about child-rearing and sexual socialization. Warning children about the dangers in the world and giving them information about sex both seem to be more the province of mothers than fathers (Roberts, et al., 1979). This is not necessarily because mothers are more concerned about the potential danger than are fathers. Both men and women expressed equal levels of concern and awareness about the problem of abuse. Rather, according to the division of responsibilities in American families, it seems to fall to mothers to translate these concerns to their children.

Compared to the difference between mothers and fathers, the difference between sons and daughters was negligible. In spite of the fact that sexual victimization is generally seen as a problem that affects girls more than boys, both sons and daughters were talked to (or perhaps we should say, ignored) in roughly equal proportions. If there was a difference it primarily concerned what the fathers did. Fathers had a slightly more difficult time mentioning anything about sexual abuse to their daughters than their sons. Only 11% spoke to their daughter compared to 19% who spoke to sons, a difference that was not significant at the .05 level. For mothers there was no difference.

Age of the child was a factor, but not a very strong factor, in whether a parent had talked with their children about sexual abuse. Naturally older children were somewhat more likely to have been enlightened than younger ones.
Prior to age 9, the number of parents who had said something to their children hovers between 14 and 20%. From 10 on, the number of parents who have talked with their children shoots up to between 32 and 40%.

Age 9 seems to be something of a watershed. And in fact, when we asked parents, in another

question, what age they thought was the most appropriate for talking about sexual abuse, the mean answer they gave was 9.1. The age of a child does bear some relationship to whether parents have talked with him or her about sexual abuse, but it is only one factor. Some parents talk to their very young children about it. And many parents do not do so even with their very mature children.

Here again, mothers differed from fathers in what they saw as the appropriate age for telling children. Mothers tended to advise talking to children more than a year earlier than fathers, choosing a mean age of 8.6, compared to the father's 9.8 ($F=22.34$, $p<.001$). There were no significant differences in estimates for boy as opposed to girl children.

We were interested in whether the parents remembered any specific event or concern that precipitated their decision to talk to their child about sexual abuse. We knew from other questions in the survey for example, that many parents had seen stories about sexual abuse on TV or in the newspaper during the previous year. We also knew that many of them had heard about some other person in their social network who had been the victim of sexual abuse. We wanted to know if these kinds of concerns were influential in prompting a parent to discuss sexual abuse with their child.

Table 3 shows parents answers to four questions about why they discussed sexual abuse with their children. Most just said that they decided the time had come to have such a discussion -- an ambiguous answer that gives us little additional understanding. Stories in the media or something that happened to another child did appear to be catalysts in some families. However, the simple fact that the child was spending more time by him or herself was not an important consideration.

Table 3 suggests that on the whole, parents were not extremely reflective about what prompted their discussions, but it would appear that things they hear about sexual abuse through the media, from neighbors and relatives and the school, may provide the stimulus to do something they wouldn't otherwise be inclined to do: bring up the difficult subject of sexual abuse.

WHAT PARENTS SAID

It was not possible, unfortunately, to take much encouragement from the fact that at least 29% of the parents had talked to their children about sexual abuse. When we asked parents what they actually had said to their children, their answers made us very skeptical of how well children had in fact been instructed, and whether the information they got would be of any real use.

Those parents who had talked about sexual abuse had not been shy about the subject. Most said they had had several discussions with the child about it. The median number of

discussions was actually 5.3 and a quarter of the parents said they had had ten discussions or more. If discussions had really been that frequent, there should have been much opportunity for the child to pose questions and become familiar with the subject.

Unfortunately, in spite of the quantity of the discussions, the quality of discussions seems to have left much to be desired. Many of these discussions appeared to be little more than an extension of the discussions of kidnapping. The reticence about the actual nature of sexual abuse crept into the conversations of even those who said they had talked about the subject directly. The result was that many children did not hear an entirely accurate or useful account of the subject.

For example, we gave parents a list of possible matters they might have mentioned to their child when they had their discussion about sexual abuse (Table 4). The matter that received the most attention according to parents was the warning not to be lured into someone's car. In truth, only a small amount of child sexual abuse occurs in offenders' cars. This was obviously a subject more appropriate to a discussion of kidnapping than a discussion of sexual abuse.

By contrast, the sexual parts of the discussion of sexual abuse, in other words, the information that identified the real nature of the problem, was the information that was most often left out. Only two-thirds of the parents in their discussion of sexual abuse mentioned the possibility of someone trying to remove the child's clothes. Only three-quarters mentioned a situation where an adult might try to exhibit their sex organs inappropriately to the child. This suggests that important pieces of information were in many cases missing from the parent-child discussions.

The most serious omission in the discussions of sexual abuse concerned the nature of the persons who might try to molest the child. It is abudantly evident that most parents only talked to their children about the possibility of abuse by strangers. The possibility of abuse by friends and particularly the possibility of abuse by family members, went largely unmentioned.

We asked people in two ways about what kinds of offenders they had warned their children about. First we just asked parents, "What people or kind of people did you tell him/her to watch out for?" and then wrote down their spontaneous answers. Then we read them a list of possible people they could have mentioned as offenders and asked them if they had specifically mentioned any of these. Column 1 of Table 5 shows their spontaneous answers, and column 2 shows their choices after we gave them the list.

People overwhelmingly remembered their discussions of sexual abuse as revolving around strangers. One in five said they warned about possible acquaintances. Very few mentioned anything about family members. When we "reminded" them about the subject

of offenders who the child might already know, a little over half "remembered" that they had said something about such people. However, even with prompting, only 22% of the respondents said that they had warned their children about the possibility of sexual abuse at the hands of a family member.

Even these numbers may be misleading. The large difference between the figures for "spontaneous mention" and "cite on prompt" in Table 5 suggests that even if parents did mention acquaintances or family members, we doubt they were strongly emphasized. The parents obviously had not remembered them spontaneously as an important part of the conversation. What they had primarily remembered was that they had warned the child about strangers. That was probably what got emphasized to the child.

We also asked parents what they had told their child to do in case someone tried to molest them. The answers showed that parents had emphasized two things: 1) get away from the offender, and 2) tell someone about the experience. In general, these are good things for a child to do. But the first suggestion, at least, is primarily useful in dealing with molestation by strangers. We suspect parents did not give enough attention to such things as saying no in an assertive way, something that is much more relevant in the case of a friend or relative who is attempting to abuse.

WHICH PARENTS TALK

We anticipated that some kinds of parents would be more apt to talk to their children about child sexual abuse than others. Perhaps having more education, or being a professional, or being a member of a younger generation might make a parent better able to discuss the problem. So we analyzed the likelihood of a parent talking to his or her child by all the background and demographic variables collected in the survey.

Surprisingly, few of the background variables made any difference. Parents' education, income, age, occupation, race, place of residence, religion or degree of religiousity were inconsequential in predicting their likelihood of talking to their child about sexual abuse. We were particularly surprised that middle-class parents did no better job than lower-class parents, and that professionals did no better than blue-collar workers. All this attests to the real difficulty of talking to children about the problem. It was a difficulty that cut across educational backgrounds and class lines.

However, one group of parents did do a significantly better job of talking to their children about sexual abuse. These were the parents who had themselves been victimized. Forty-six per cent of the parents who were abused themselves had talked to their children compared to only 26% of the other parents ($F=10.20$, $p<.05$). This can be seen as both an encouraging and a discouraging finding. It is encouraging that former victims try

to stop the cycle of abuse by alerting their own children to the problem. It is discouraging because it suggests that in our current culture only a major traumatic personal history can jolt parents into overcoming their reticence. And even then, less than half the parents who themselves had been directly affected by abuse broke with the dominant pattern of avoidance.

WHAT KEEPS PARENTS FROM TALKING

The evidence that parents avoid talking to their children about sexual abuse is quite dramatic as is the evidence that this avoidance cuts across most social groupings. The important question for people interested in the field of sexual abuse prevention then becomes why. We know from other parts of our survey that people think that sexual abuse is a serious problem. They rated it much more serious than other potentially traumatic events of childhood such as having a friend die or having parents get a divorce. They acknowledged that it occurs to a large number of children. They know many people in their social network who have been victimized (including themselves) or who have children who have been victimized (Finkelhor, 1982). Yet they do not put this knowledge or concern into action. Faced with their own children, they avoid the subject.

The most direct way to find out why people do not talk to their children about sexual abuse is to ask them. So we asked them. When we did this in our pretesting, we found that certain answers came up again and again. So in the larger survey these were the main answers we gave the parents in the full survey to choose from. These answers along with the number of parents in our survey who chose them, are shown in Table 7.

It is apparent from Table 7 that parents have many excuses for not talking about sexual abuse. They say it is a difficult subject to discuss. They said they did not wish to frighten their child. Some saw their child as being in little danger of being abused. Some said the child was still too young to talk about the subject. Several of these explanations deserve some more detailed discussion.

Child in Little Danger

It is logical for parents to see no need to discuss a danger with a child if they honestly believe the child is very unlikely to encounter such a danger. And 55% of the parents who did not talk to their child said just that: they felt there was little danger that their child would be abused. When we ran a discriminant analysis on the parents who did and did not talk, this was the question above all others that was most effective in distinguishing between the two groups. Apparently a great many parents do not see their children as being in any danger, and as a result decline to talk to them about the problem.

Certainly this would suggest the need to raise the level of public knowledge about the prevalence of the problem. But what is surprising about this idea is that from other data in the survey we would have said that public alarm is already quite high. For example, when we asked parents to estimate how often they thought sexual abuse occurred, over 50% of the parents said it occurred to one girl in 10 or more. When we asked them whether they knew someone who had ever been abused, 47% said yes. Sexual abuse was prevalent in their environment. The parents knew that.

However, it is one thing to acknowledge that children in general are at risk to sexual abuse and another to acknowledge that the danger extends to your own child. People often maintain a false sense of security about unpleasant events by believing that they only happen to other people. For example, 61% of our parents believed they lived in a neighborhood that was safer than average in terms of their child's risk of being sexually abused. Only 4% said they thought that their neighborhood was more dangerous than average. Obviously parents minimize the danger of sexual abuse to their own children even in the face of knowledge that sexual abuse is prevalent.

Fear of Frightening the Child

Many of the parents, and many professionals, point out that sexual abuse is a hard topic to raise because it can easily and unnecessarily frighten a child. What adult is eager to give the child the disturbing news that there are people in the world who wish to do him or her harm. But the comparison with kidnapping is instructive. Almost all the parents had talked to their children about kidnapping. It is hard to imagine that a child's conception of kidnapping could be any less frightening than their conception of sexual abuse. To give chidren the idea that someone may try to take them away from their family and not let them see their family again seems a far scarier thing than to let children know that there are people in the world who may try to touch their sex organs. Especially to a young child with a rather vague conception of sex but a rather distinct and alarming conception of separation, kidnapping would seem like a far more potent fear to plant in a child's mind. The irony is that kidnapping is a relatively rare event, yet parents warn their children about it in great numbers. Michael Agopian estimates 25,000 children are kidnapped in this country every year, and that most of these are children kidnapped by their own parents in the course of custody disputes. The number of children kidnapped by strangers is probably only measured in a few hundreds.

In contrast to kidnapping, sexual abuse is measured in hundreds of thousands of children every year. If even 10% of all children are sexually victimized during their childhood (and all current surveys indicate that the figure is probably higher then this), then given about 20 million children under the age of 16 we would expect over a hundred thousand victimizations in the course of any year. Sexual abuse occurs much more frequently

than kidnapping and we suspect parents know this.

So it is not just the fact that sexual abuse is thought to be an unlikely and frightening possibility that explains why parents do not tell. It would seem more likely that parents persuade themselves that their children are not in much danger and they will be unduly frightened because in part they find the prospect of warning them about the danger so anxiety-producing.

Child is Too Young

Thirty-six percent of the parents said that they thought their child was too young to be told about sexual abuse. And indeed parents did show a general tendency to give more information about sexual abuse to older than younger children. When asked what was the best age to tell a child about sexual abuse, most parents said 9.

The unfortunate problem here is that many young children do become the victims of sexual abuse. This is clearly revealed from the parents own experience. We asked the parents in another part of the survey whether they themselves had ever been victimized and 12% said they had. About a third of these parents had been victimized before the age of 9. Moreover, when we asked parents to estimate the age of greatest vulnerability to sexual abuse, 55% indicated great vulnerability under the age of 9. Parents know that quite young children are at risk.

If parents wait until 9 or after to talk about sexual abuse, it is not that they doubt the risk to young children. Rather, we think they postpone discussions because they think that it will become easier to tell an older child. They think that the disturbing and sexual content in the discussion will be better handled by a nine year old than a six year old.

Unfortunately, once they start postponing it to wait for the right time, many parents just keep on postponing. In many families the older the child gets, the older the parent thinks he or she has to be before it is appropriate to talk. So parents in our sample who had 8 year old children thought the best age for telling was age 9. But parents who had 9 year old children thought the best age for telling was age 10. This inflationary spiral often ends up with the parent never having gotten around to talking with the child about sexual abuse. For the most part, we think parents say children are too young, not out of a realistic assessment of the child's needs or ability to understand, but rather as a rationalization for the sense of discomfort they feel about the subject.

Talking About Sex

Obviously much of the discomfort that parents feel in talking about sexual abuse concerns sex. Parents have a notoriously difficult time talking to their children about sexual topics of all sorts. Other research indicates that parents

neglect to discuss with their children a wide variety of sex related subjects such as contraception, intercourse, venereal disease, masturbation and so forth (Roberts, et al., 1978). One obvious reason why sexual abuse may be more difficult to talk about than kidnapping is the fact that kidnapping does not involve sex.

However, we were surprised to find in our survey of parents that sexual abuse was not just harder to talk about than kidnapping, it was apparently harder to talk about than a wide assortment of other sexual subjects. Parents in our survey talked about homosexuality, intercourse and even abortion more frequently than they did about sexual abuse. Only contraception was a subject more difficult to discuss. So sexual abuse may be even more difficult to talk about than other sexual subjects.

However, before we theorize about why sexual abuse might be more difficult to talk about than homosexuality, we should hasten to say that our findings on this matter do not agree with the Roberts et al. study, the one other research that surveyed parents discussions with children on a variety of sexual issues. In that Cleveland study, parents apparently found it easier to talk with their children about "molestation" than about such subjects as abortion, homosexuality, masturbation and intercourse. Nevertheless, all sexual topics are hard for parents to discuss, and sexual abuse may be one of the harder ones.

Parents have a hard time talking about sex for a number of reasons. For one thing, parents often feel they lack the knowledge, vocabulary and practice to speak about sexual matters comfortably. They fear embarrassing themselves in front of children by appearing to be ignorant, tongue-tied or confused.

Secondly, sexual topics usually trigger many strong emotional feelings for parents. They may remind parents of sexual embarrassments from their own life. They may provoke feelings about sexual dissatisfactions or disappointments that still concern them today. Parents may be aware of the fact that they are confused about certain issues of sexual values -- like the advisability of premarital sex. And they are aware that discussions of sex may call upon them to talk about their own experience or give opinions about these troublesome issues. Since discussions of sex seem like such an emotional minefield, many parents choose to skirt this territory entirely.

Moreover, children often collaborate in the avoidance of sexual discussions. It is not just that children sense parents reticence and embarrassment. Children, too, learn early the culture's paradoxical message about sex: it is bad to appear to be interested in sex, but it is also bad to appear to be ignorant of it. To talk with parents about sex often implies both that one is interested in sex, but also that one lacks knowledge. So they not only avoid bringing up sex with parents, they sometimes resist even when the parent takes the initiative.

Discussions of sexual abuse do not really need to be concerned with a great deal of sexual information, something most parents don't realize. A parent can tell children that they should not let an older person put his hands in their pants, or play with his private parts, without a lengthy discussion about sex. Parents can also tell children that their body is their own and they have a right not to be touched in ways that make them feel uncomfortable or bad. This too does not require a lengthy discussion of other sexual matters.

However, it is undoubtedly true that the more sexual information a child has, the better protected they are against sexual abuse. Just a few warnings about "hands in the pants" without a more general context in which to make sense of this may be of limited help. But since there are probably some parents who will never be able to have very complete discussions about sex with children, it is better that they be able to give them some warnings about sexual abuse rather than none at all.

What many parents may apparently need in order to give information about such sensitive subjects as sexual abuse are some easy formulas, possibly like this "hands in the pants" warning. This may have been part of what parents had in mind when they responded so readily to the answer that it "just had not occurred to them to talk about the subject" (see Table 7). We suspect that one reason why kidnapping receives such universal comment from parents, for example, is that such formulas do exist on this subject, for example: "don't get into a car with a stranger", "don't take candy from a stranger", etc. The formulas of this sort give parents a specific and limited message to pass on to their children. Although parents may have imagined that such formulas were protecting their child against sexual abuse, we now know that this is not the case. Obviously some new formulas need to be popularized to help parents broach the subject.

CONCLUSION

In spite of some surprising knowledgeability about the problem of sexual abuse, it would appear from our Boston survey that parents are doing a very poor job of communicating with their children about it. This is a serious failure. We know that child sexual abuse is a large scale problem that will touch the lives of many children. If we have any ambition to reduce the toll of the problem, we must begin to insure that children get better instruction about what sexual abuse is and how to avoid it.

From talking to our Boston parents, it would appear that a number of steps may be useful in helping parents to do this. First of all, parents need to be impressed with the seriousness and the immediacy of the problem. Although they are knowledgeable about it, it may still be too easy for them to relegate it to a dusty corner of their awareness. In particular, they need to be persuaded that their own child could be

victimized. In spite of their knowledge, parents seemed to be relatively complacent, doubting that abuse would occur to their child or in their own neighborhood. However, they said that one of the things that most motivated them to talk with their children was hearing about abuse that had occurred to someone else in their neighborhood or extended social network. Moreover, the parents with the best records of talking with their children were those who had been victimized themselves. These are the parents who really are familiar with the risk, so they do not leave the matter to chance.

Another strategy that needs to be pursued is to help parents to break through their persistent reticence about bringing up sexual matters with their children. Although it may be only a second best approach, parents can be taught to give warnings about sexual victimization that do not require them to engage their children in elaborate discussions of sex. As some parents are persuaded that education about sexual abuse can be done prior to and separate from general sex education, they may do more of it. One thing that will assist them a great deal in this task is if educators provide parents with simply remembered formula phrases and contexts through which they can provide warnings about sexual abuse. These formulas may be a good vehicle for getting help to children even from the most sexually inhibited parents.

Ultimately, the responsibility for educating children about the problem of sexual abuse will have to be shared by other people outside the family, as well. In this regard, it is encouraging to note from the survey that parents seem to be very willing to accept help. There was a very widespread support among the Boston parents for the schools providing information on sexual abuse to children. This support has been also recognized by educators who have gone into schools with specially formulated programs dealing with the problem. In spite of these successes, relatively few school systems have made a conscious effort to insert education about sexual abuse into their curriculum. Those concerned about the problem should intensify their efforts to get schools to help. It will probably take a concerted effort on the part of child welfare professionals, parents, schools, and even the media to bring about the changes necessary to insure that children get sufficient and accurate information about the problem of sexual abuse and how to avoid it.

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VS20 Tables

Table 1. Difficult Subjects Parents Had Discussed With Their Child

Subject	% Discussed (N=517)
Death	92
Kidnapping	87
Pregnancy and birth	84
Drugs	81
Mental Illness	66
Homosexuality	44
Sexual Intercourse	43
Suicide	36
Abortion	33
Sexual Abuse	29
Birth Control	26

Table 2. Discussing Sexual Abuse With Child

	% (N=521)
Respondent discussed directly	29
Respondent discussed indirectly	31
Some other person discussed	11

Table 3. Reasons for First Discussion About Sexual Abuse

Reason	% Parents Citing (N=146)
Story appearing on radio, TV, newspaper	51
Something happening tc another child	48
Decided time had come	70
Child spending more time alone	19

VS20 Tables

Table 4. Subjects Mentioned in Discussion of Sexual Abuse

Subject	% Parents Citing (N=147)
Someone tempting child with rewards	86
Someone luring child into car	96
Someone taking child away	84
Someone trying to remove child's clothes	65
Someone touching child's sex organs	80
Someone exhibiting their sex organs to child	74

Table 5. Perpetrators Mentioned in Discussion Of Sexual Abuse

Person	% Parents Citing Spontaneously (N=148)	With Prompting (N=148)
Strangers	77	97
Adults child knows	21	53
Other children	14	44
Family members	7	22

Table 6. Instructions to Child in Case of Sexual Abuse

Action	% of Parents Citing Spontaneously (N=148)	With Prompting (N=148)
Run Away	69	91
Tell Parent	49	98
Tell Someone Else	29	77
Fight Back	16	45
Came Home	4	
Scream	7	

VS20 Tables

Table 7. Attitudes About Talking About Sexual Abuse Among Tellers and Non-Tellers

Attitude	% Agreeing Tellers (N=146)	% Agreeing Non-Tellers (N=359)	Sig
1. Your child is too young to really understand about sexual abuse	16	44	***
2. There is little actual danger that your child will be sexually abused	21	55	***
3. You are concerned that discussions of sexual abuse can frighten your child unnecessarily	31	56	***
4. Sexual abuse is a difficult subject to talk about with a child	61	74	**
5. It has just not occurred to you to talk to your child about sexual abuse	4	65	***
6. Your child does not want to talk about the subject of sexual abuse	35	37	N.S.

**chi-square: p<.01